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Card's Game

The Unfortunate Decline of Orson Scott Card

For most of its history, science fiction has displayed a distinct indifference to people. Often the literary province of the adolescent and socially inept, those who prefer machines to their mothers, the genre's stories have tended to treat human beings as props, lavishing attention instead on fantastic inventions and otherworldly creatures, the details of discoveries and breakthroughs, and the complexities of bureaucracy and imagined civilizations. They traffic in hardware and software, nuts and bolts, visions of the future in which time and technology have altered human life, bringing new luxuries and new dilemmas. With a few exceptions, such as Ray Bradbury and Kurt Vonnegut, the genre's greatest names have mostly focused on the exterior at the expense of the interior: gadgets and governments, actions and institutions. From Isaac Asimov's vast, math-driven future-history in the Foundation series to Robert Heinlein's libertarian moon revolts to Arthur C. Clarke's distant visions of human evolution, science fiction writers have treated humanity on a macro scale, giving little thought to its micro particulars. Many of them men of science, the genre's writers have often concerned themselves with the systems and technologies that shape society, all but ignoring the individuals within it. It's fiction for physicists, economists, and computer scientists, studying the mechanics and technology of man, with scant consideration of the vagaries of character and emotion that go with them.

One prominent exception is Orson Scott Card, the author of the 1985 novel *Ender's Game* and more than two dozen other works of science fiction and fantasy. Neither a scientist nor a futurist, Card is a humanist, a surveyor of man's potential for great reason as well as devastating violence, a defender of both faith and skepticism, a believer in the permanence of human nature and traditional social institutions, an imaginative writer who looks to the future and wonders not how society will be different, but how its inhabitants will be the same.

To the extent that he has indulged in the elements that characterize so much of the genre—the geeky gadgetry and the theories of social development, the space suits, attacking aliens, and oppressive governments—it has been in the service of a deeper exploration of man's motivations. His interest has been less in the minutiae of technology's operations—the hows and whats—than in their moral aftershocks and in the tiny ways they shape the day-to-day existence of families and individuals, the life of the mind, and, occasionally, the tumult of the heart. That is, until recently.

The grandson of a prominent Mormon, Card was born in 1951. He served on a Latter-day Saints mission in Brazil for two years after attending Brigham Young University, where he majored in theater. Though he eventually decided that he lacked the gift for performance—he deemed himself too self-conscious on stage, too "in his head"—he had some early success as a playwright, even running a production company for a short time. In 1977, after a few years of writing and producing plays, he began penning science fiction shorts, and was met with immediate praise. Before long, he moved to writing full time.

During these early years, he earned a reputation for being somewhat bloody-minded—a reputation not entirely undeserved. One early story features several ferocious, fatal beatings; another tells of alien overlords with a taste for their subjects' flesh; still another portrays political dissidents put through extreme and torturous executions only to be resurrected in new bodies with full memories of their painful deaths. And yet even in these early stories—clearly the work of a young writer with a juvenile taste for gruesomeness—Card's humanistic signatures are evident. The gore isn't simply gratuitous; it serves as an opportunity for moral reflection about the preservation of life and the heavy cost of violence, subjects that make up the thematic backbone of much of Card's later work.

Card's novels also betray a fascination with combat, violence, and military codes, but they nonetheless display a deep loathing for hatred rooted in political and cultural difference. The best example of this is his most famous work and its sequels. *Ender's Game* is the story of a genius child soldier, Ender Wiggin, who, despite his great capacity for empathy (and even because of it), coldly murders his opponents. Far into the future, not long after humanity has narrowly defeated an invading alien fleet, couples are limited to two children—and the best and brightest of those children are whisked off to space at age five to go to a battle school, where they train in extensive, complicated war games to fight off future extraterrestrial threats. Ender's two older siblings are both exceptionally brilliant, yet both are flawed in ways that prevent them from going into training—the eldest, Peter, is too cruel and heartless for effective leadership; the middle child, Valentine, is not aggressive enough to fight a

war. So an exception is made for their parents in hopes of producing a child with similar intelligence but a better balance of aggression and pathos.

The result is Ender, a character who embodies Card's ideals: moderation, competence, military prowess, compassion, and skepticism. He proves to be an individual of genuine conviction who never ceases to question his own actions, a boy who trades equally on both his youthful inexperience and his spectacular brilliance. At times, he is also shockingly violent. By the novel's end, he has killed, and done so with ruthless efficiency. Not only has he taken down a few of his enemies among his peers, he's destroyed the homeworld of the only other intelligent life he or any other human is aware of. By any reasonable measure, it was necessary: the aliens, called "buggers," had proven deadly, and his own species had a right to survive. But Ender, as the destroyer of their world, must bear the burden of his actions. He mourns his deed and the dead: "I killed ten billion buggers, whose queens, at least, were as alive and wise as any man, who had not even launched a third attack against us, and no one even thinks to call it a crime."

There is violence embedded in Ender's nature, but also great compassion—and his success is only made possible because that violence and compassion were exploited by his superiors. His attack on the buggers was unwitting: he thought he was only in a holographic training simulator when he was actually controlling a real battle fleet attacking the buggers' homeworld. In essence, Ender was able to defeat the buggers because, first, his superiors made him believe he was only playing a game and not actually killing anything, and second, even if he *had* realized he was killing something, he was expected because of his youth not to appreciate its real significance. "Any decent person who knows what warfare is can never go into battle with a whole heart," his instructor tells him afterwards; Ender could only invest his whole heart in the victorious battle because he did not know it was a real battle at all. The distance from the force of what he was really doing was what enabled him to do it, but that detachment from destruction did not make it any less destructive.

Ender's Game provides a soulful and complex portrait of both man's primal drive for violence and his revulsion toward it, and, along with its first two sequels, *Speaker for the Dead* and *Xenocide*, it represents the high point of Card's thirty-year career. In these novels, the often adolescent science fiction conceits he employs—they all revolve around violence, technology, and games—were a means by which to approach larger ideas about human failings and struggles. But in his recent work, Card seems happy to deploy the same devices purely in their own service. The juvenilia has persisted, and it has overtaken all else.

The climactic simulator scene in *Ender's Game* is just one of several instances of video games in Card's corpus. *Ender's Game* also features an

eerie, self-directed computer game that provides the battle school's authorities with psychological profiles of the students who play it—a game that, in the sequels, develops into a conscious entity. The lead character in Card's 1992 novel *Lost Boys*, Step Fletcher, is a video game designer, and one of that book's central mysteries involves a strange video game played by his son. And there's a certain video-game-like quality to much of Card's writing. Many of his heroes have so uncanny an insight into their world that his stories are imbued with a weirdly deterministic sense of human nature—human beings are measurable, systematic creatures: learn the pattern, learn the person, and thus learn how to manipulate him. The vagaries of human behavior are, for anyone intelligent enough, reducible in such a way that navigating any human interaction becomes rather like a complex video game, where part of the challenge isn't just to play by the rules, but to figure them out.

This growing tendency has certainly diminished the humanism of Card's writing. His recent work—like the parallel Ender series starring a savvy youngster named Bean—has become increasingly dissociated from the complex, sympathetic characters that marked his best novels. Instead, Card has taken to following the logistics of geopolitical and military action, placing various hastily sketched characters on a board and letting them play things out rather like, well, a game.

In real life, Card himself was involved in the development of the 2005 video game *Advent Rising*. And he has now gone a step further with his most recent full-length novel, *Empire* (2006). It was first conceptualized as a video game, and one will eventually be produced from its story. It is not, to put it mildly, Card's strongest offering.

But it is recognizably a Card novel. The story has a military milieu and heroes who are, as always, brilliant, humble, ultra-dedicated, and hyper-competent. It imagines what might happen if, in the near future, the animosity between the conservative and liberal political factions in the United States were to break out into a heavily militarized shooting war. (Set aside for now the preposterousness of this scenario; Card is hardly a keen political analyst, as anyone who has read his newspaper column has discerned.) The story's two heroes are Major Reuben Malich, a family man made world-weary by his experience with Washington politics, and Captain Bartholomew Coleman, a youngish soldier who itches for combat, makes wry jokes in the aftermath of a presidential assassination, and has never had a girlfriend long enough to get to know her. Both are decent to the core—men who care for country, family, and what's good and right.

The book styles itself as a plea for moderation; although Malich is a military conservative, he is married to a former liberal activist who is instrumental in the final reconciliation. But the characters are thin, the prose

is clipped into short, shunted sentences and easily skimmable paragraphs, and the story lacks the subtlety and moral complexity of Card's better, earlier works. The heroes fight off hordes of variously armed henchmen, face off against increasingly difficult military technology, and spend the latter portion of the novel staring at maps while hunting for levers and switches in an underground complex. It reads, in short, like what it essentially is: a novelization of a video game.

Card's weakness for video game tropes is telling. It is as if he secretly longs to trade in his word processor for a joystick. In fact, he has spoken publicly of having a video game "addiction" lasting well into his adult life. And in June 2007, Card told the gaming-news website *Gaming Today* that there are probably about twenty novels he never wrote because he was spending untold hours playing computer games. He also enthusiastically told the interviewer about his vision for game spin-offs from *Ender's Game* and his other older books.

What this means is that, as video games have become more complex, Card's writing has become less so, and he now hopes to turn his best works into video games. The writer whose fiction so often operates on the premise that people are knowable, predictable creatures—not just of habit but of unmistakable pattern, able to be manipulated as if in a game—has let his writing drift toward, even merge with, the video games he once merely wrote about.

In a larger sense, though, it is *Empire*'s story, such as it is, that is most distressing. The enemies are fellow Americans—and so, in the forthcoming video game, players will be trying to destroy not just an imaginary race of bug-like aliens but other people recognizable as members of our own society. Although Card has protested (as in the *Gaming Today* interview) that the aim of the game will be to quickly end the civil war and to reconcile both sides, the whole point of the game from the player's perspective, and the reason that it will surely work better as a cartridge than a hardback, will be to blast your political opponents. That is the attraction in "shooters": the thrill of the conflict and the satisfaction of completing the game. The supposed reconciliation at the game's end is of secondary importance; it can only serve to soothe any vaguely troubled consciences who may perhaps sense that yes, this thrill can be deadly—a lesson Card once understood himself, as when he wrote the climactic scene of *Ender's Game*.

William S. Burroughs wrote that, "There may be other universes based on all sorts of other principles, but ours seems to be based on war and games." Orson Scott Card has always seemed to write as if attempting to prove this statement true, but one wonders if lately he hasn't taken it too far. After *Empire*, it may be time to unplug.

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